

HOSTELS, HOTELS AND THE POPULAR MIND

by

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Hostelling is the best way to see Europe if you're young enough, strong enough and like cold showers. You meet students and university professors from Germany, England, France, Holland, from all over Europe. Americans, too. There is an infectious camaraderie that helps one overlook the shared dormitories, the shared lavatories, wet stockings in your face at night, deadlines for coming and going, locations at the peripheries of cities and institutional food. It's the least expensive way to travel, providing you are an expert hitch-hiker with no more than a knapsack on your back.

I stayed in several of these places, but just wasn't travelling properly to take advantage of the freedoms they offered. When you are lugging two over-size suitcases around, it is not conducive to going 'on the road.' A woman must be prepared to leave all her clothes at home except for one skirt, one pair of slacks, one pair of shorts and three sweaters, leaving enough room for an extra pair of shoes and underclothes.

You must not think you're going to meet the Countesse of Rosse (Tony Armstrong-Jones' mother) or actress Siobhan

McKenna (which I did) and therefore have to take along suitable evening dress and its appurtenances. In London, it's not necessary to change from a sweater and skirt to a more fashionable attire for the theatre, even if you're seeing Alec Guinness or the Lunts. I didn't go to the Folies Bergiere, but not because I didn't have the right clothes to wear. Perhaps you'll miss some of the glamor of a trip to Europe, but you can more than make up for that with the wonderful friendships you'll make hostelling.

I saved close to four thousand lire because of a friendship made in a Venice hostel. Two hitch-hiking partners (it is easier to get a ride in Europe if you travel in two's), a German student and an American Olympic swimmer, gave me a valuable tip. Most cities have bus tours to acquaint the tourist with the wonders and splendors of their city. In Venice, vehicular traffic is forbidden (they have a water problem there). So all the tour agencies sponsor walking tours through St. Mark's, the Doges Palace and their vicinities.

Mr. Olympic Swimmer pointed out that if I casually joined a group a few minutes after it started out, making myself unobtrusive at the beginning and very obtrusive once accepted, no one would challenge my pointless questions and I could spend the whole morning listening to our guide or flirting with a single, American male. It worked beautifully.

After accomplishing this feat with boundless dexterity, I contemplated taking the gondola tour in the afternoon, which is outrageously expensive. Prepared not to give in, I was convinced by said American male to try the morning's stunt. ~~Who turns out to be our guide but the same educational~~ gentleman from the morning tour who recognized us, smiled, and assumed I was again a part of the group. That gondola ride, with the help of some noon-hour wine plus the headiness that comes with outwitting the Italians, was one of my most pleasant experiences.

The hostel in Rome was somewhat less colorful, though I was nearly convinced by several Israeli students that I should join a kibbutz for six months. You rarely sit at one of the dining room tables for more than twenty minutes before you're learning all sorts of ways to travel cheaper from Bari to Athens or across the Mediterranean or any route whatever, particularly those you've just come over and would have welcomed this whispered information two weeks ago. Yes, hostelling is grand, but don't forget your sleeping sheet, knife, fork and tin plate, among other necessities. The American Youth Hostels, Inc. will give you all the information you need.

Choosing a hotel depends on the mood I'm in. After staying at a hostel for several days, I head for a room with bath - hot bath. Rooms with baths are hard to come by if you're not staying in first class hotels, which I was not.

Otherwise, a good, clean, second class hotel is quite comfortable if you can stand chintz and faded wallpaper. I paid more than three dollars a night for a single only once throughout my trip - in Nice. And this includes the one time I decided to splurge and stay de-luxe in Madrid.

It also includes lovely views of the sea from balconies in Sorrento, Malaga and Tel Aviv. And includes a view from my window of the famous Brunelleschi dome in Florence; dancing in the streets of Piccadilly from a London balcony; a view of white gleaming buildings from atop a balcony in Tangier; Vesuvius, from a Naples roof; backyard gardens from a Genoese hotel dining room; a view of the twisting streets of the Plaka quarter in Athens and the stone alleyways of the old quarter in Jerusalem, Jordan; Notre Dame, breakfasting on croissants and cafe au lait in a Parisien dining room; the fashionable Kurfuerstendamm in Berlin; cheering Irish football fans from a Dublin hotel window; the Nile River in Cairo, the Stadtpark in Vienna--each of these views was as precious to me as another tourist's \$20/day view from a Hilton hotel window.

The concierge in the second or third class hotel (with the possible exception of Paris) will put up with your attempts in his language with good humor and understanding. He will not classify you with the lavishly spending Americans staying at the Savoy and will not assume you make \$10,000 a year.

He will be courteous, tolerant and anxious to please. He won't be overbearing, fussy and too polite, oozing false enthusiasm at your arrival, as is the case in the de-luxe hotels where you are surrounded with service, and not only charged for it, but bored with it. The smaller, less expensive hotels will let you go your own way. You're even obliged to pay three or four cents to reach top-floor pensions in Italy by way of rickety, ancient elevators that shudder violently as ten-lire coins slip into the slot.

My Madrid splendor was not planned. On the plane from Barcelona, I chanced to ask my seat companion for the name of a good hotel in Madrid. He told me. When the taxi dropped me in front of this imposing building with revolving doors plus door-man, I was embarrassed. Because it was raining when I left Barcelona, and it was raining when I arrived in Madrid, and I hadn't yet bought the snappy new raincoat in Gibraltar. I did not look like the patron of a de-luxe hotel. My faithful old raincoat also served as a cooler-weather coat (with sweaters) and was properly beat-looking with the dirt rubbed in from dusty train compartments. I smiled wanly at clusters of bell-boys who met me coming through the door, waved my passport, and raced to my well-appointed room (no view). After dinner, I sneaked out as quietly as possible, guardedly made an inquiry from the desk-clerk, and the following day appeared haughty and confident in a new suede jacket, the mark of distinction in Madrid. (It certainly is a mark; within an hour after I ventured forth, two people, both Americans, came up to me to ask for directions.)

I shall conclude this discourse with a few don't's. Don't register in a de-luxe hotel if you're from Punxatawney--you'll be terribly uncomfortable. Don't register in a hotel with a gentleman without expecting a single tab the following morning. (In Europe, asking for separate rooms means you're shy with the hotel clerk, but not with the man). If you're driving, stay at a hotel away from the center of the city, park your car and use the public transportation (taking the wrong bus to St. Peter's on a Sunday morning can lead to a not unpleasant dilemma, especially if there's a chivalrous Italian aboard who speaks English).

And one final bit of advice re:hotels cribbed from a brochure: An offered tip may be declined, but it is never an insult.

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